

Denver Water won't drain High Line for good

Normal flow through upper portion of canal will be maintained, officials at utility say

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Denver Water officials assured water users and supporters of the historic High Line Canal on Thursday night that the utility has no plans to plug the waterway permanently.

"We don't have any plans to shut down the upper canal," said Marc Waage, a Denver Water hydrological engineer. About 50 people attended the informational meeting about the future of the 66-mile-long canal.

Denver Water regulates how much water flows through the 120-year-old canal, which is showing its age and losing about 80 percent of the water released in it to seepage.

Colorado's long-running drought has had a troubling effect on the canal, which is divided into three sections — the upper canal, lower canal, and below Sand Creek.

Water volume will continue to flow at its usual frequency during an average weather year through the upper canal, although the depth will be slightly lower, by about 6 inches, because of the seepage, Waage said.

The upper canal starts at a diversion dam on the South Platte River near Waterton Canyon and runs through southeast Denver, where it crosses Cherry Creek. Trails along the upper canal are extremely popular with runners, bikers and hikers.

"I'm concerned we will lose water (completely) on the canal at

some point," said Jan Pilcher, a concerned recreational user and Cherry Hills Village resident.

Pilcher said the canal is one of the "crown jewels of Denver," and she typically walks sections of it four or five times a week.

"We hope to see it preserved," Pilcher said.

The downstream end of the canal, below Sand Creek, however, will be bone-dry unless the drought gives way to a wet year, Waage said.

The biggest user below Sand Creek is the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, a reclaimed wildlife refuge.

Denver Water is working with arsenal officials to find ground wells on the property to fulfill the arsenal's needs until 2011, when a planned water-recycling plant

will begin supplying water to the refuge.

The lower canal, which runs from Cherry Creek to Sand Creek, will have water flows for four weeks annually — two in the spring and two in summer or fall. That's just enough to keep trees along the canal alive, Waage said.

In 2003, water was released into the canal on 70 days, Waage said. During the course of a typical year, water is released on about 90 days.

No water is released into the canal between October and April.

Denver Water is studying whether a flaky chemical compound known as polyacrylamides, or PAMs, can cut back the seepage by about 30 percent when sprayed onto the canal bed, Waage said.